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AUTHOR Copa, George H.
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ABSTRACT

Presented to the American Education Research Association, this speech points out eleven ways examination of a National Institute of Education study plan could have implications for vocational education: (1) defining key terms, (2) identifying or surfacing issues, (3) describing recent or impending changes, (4) summarizing findings, (5) integrating the findings with other related studies, (6) interpreting findings, (7) rationalizing what is found, (8) theorizing to explain findings, (9) drawing implications, (10) recommending other study implications and (11) suggesting study extensions. Forty-one terms found in the study plan that might be further defined for clarity are presented. Three of the four issues identified by the study plan are: How best to distribute federal funds with accompanying data base to rationalize the scheme and federal role?; Is there compliance with the federal laws, how much compliance should be mandated, and how can it be achieved?; and Is consumer and homemaking education needed and effective, and should it be a part of vocational education? The author suggests that the accuracy and sensibility of results will depend on the active interface between the study team, decision makers both in and out of vocational education, and those doing vocational education. (LRA)

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IMPLICATIONS OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

by George H. Copa*

I do not represent the Bureau of Adult and Occupational Education nor the American Vocational Association, although I am a member. I have been a student in and teacher of vocational education. I now teach teachers and do research and evaluation of vocational education. As an idea of my activities in the past month, I have spent several days in vocational education classrooms observing the interaction of students and teachers; I have also spent several days working with the staff of the State Department of Education and State Advisory Council for Vocational Education in Minnesota. I am currently a member of the technical advisory pannel for one of the components of the NIE study of vocational education. I have given you this background information so that you are better able to understand my perspectives related to the NIE study.

My purpose is to point out the implications of a plan for a study - indeed an intuitive exercise, even if I had the study final report in hand. I approached this presentation by reflecting on the ways a study can have implications; I listed 11 ways which I thought were fairly mutually exclusive. They were:

1. Define terms
2. Identify issues
3. Describe
4. Summarize
5. Interpret
6. Integrate
7. Rationalize
8. Theorize
9. Conclude
10. Recommend
11. Suggest extensions

My approach was to examine the study plan in terms of if and to what extent it is likely to have implications for vocational education in each of these ways. My interpretations are subject to the limitations of my experience in vocational

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*George H. Copa is Professor and Associate Director, Minnesota Research and and Development Center for Vocational Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota. This paper was prepared for presentation at the American Educational Research Association, April, 1978, Toronto, Canada.

education and research, my ability to comprehend what is written in the study plan, the total time available for my examination and, I suspect, several other factors I have failed to realize.

Going on, the first way a study can have implications is by defining key terms. This study plan is "loaded" with terms and phrases vocational educators and others have been grappling with for a long time. If the study can result in more clarity of definition of these terms, its implications will be significant and its relative cost trivial. Some terms sampled from the plan's test include:

1. Greatest human resource need
2. Special needs population
3. Comprehensive and balanced national information about vocational education
4. Consequences, as of legislation
5. Federal role, as in vocational education
6. Responsibility of State and local government agencies, as in vocational education
7. Responsiveness, as to legislation
8. Programmatic developments, as in vocational education
9. Successful programs
10. Exemplary programs
11. Coordination, as with CETA and vocational education
12. Occupational skills
13. Compliance
14. Non-compliance
15. Correspondence, as between federal and state regulations
16. Democratized planning process
17. Annual program plan and accountability report
18. Annual program evaluation (by Advisory Council)
19. Equal access, as to vocational education
20. Supplement and not supplant (as with funding)
21. Financial needs, as of LEA
22. Quality of interaction, as between federal and state
23. Catalytic function, as with Federal government
24. Capacity of Federal government
25. Clarity of regulations
26. Clear and uniform policy objectives
27. Adequacy of coordination
28. Utility, as of evaluation results
29. Program improvement
30. Program quality and effectiveness
31. Benefits of vocational education
32. Consequences, as of specifying evaluation criteria
33. Complementary and reinforcing or conflicting and redundant evaluation requirements
34. Pertinent literature
35. Results of participation, as in Consumer and Homemaking
36. Neglected, as in evaluation
37. School-age parents
38. Intelligent consumers
39. Competent homemakers of future

40. Distinctive and needed function in the educational system
41. Quality of family life

As I said, more clarity and consensus of definition for these terms would, I predict, have immense implications, even using the criterion of "will result in improved teaching techniques or curriculum materials that will be used in a substantial number of classrooms or other learning situations within five years."

A second way the study could have implications is by identifying or surfacing issues. Here the study plan, and more particularly the Congressional mandate, have clear implications for vocational education. The issues, in brief, are:

1. How best to distribute federal funds with accompanying data base to rationalize the scheme and federal role?
2. Is their compliance with the federal laws and how much compliance should be mandate and how can it be achieved?
3. What are the effects of required evaluation? How much is enough?
4. Is consumer and homemaking education needed, effective and should is be a part of vocational education?

Identification of these issues in so specific and forceful a way as a Congressionally mandated study by an independent federal agency should communicate a number of things in a way that cannot be ignored by vocational education. At the least, it provides an advanced agenda for topics to be discussed by Congress in 1982 at its next revision of federal laws relating to vocational education.

As a third way to have implications, will the study describe. Description could focus in at least three ways, on what ought to be, what is and how it is being achieved and changes in what is. The study plan appears to focus on the later two - what is and recent or impending changes; very little, except with the component relating to consumer and homemaking educations is likely to imply what ought to be. The limitation of this approach is that if the phenomenon under study is changing rapidly, the descriptions will always be out of date. The reason for this focus is evident in the wording and intent of the Congressional mandate for the study. My judgment is that this narrower focus will most limit the implications of this study for vocational education. The assumption is made that Congress is the only body which defines what vocational education "is" and "should be." As I said, major study efforts seem to be focused on describing "what is" at present with some attention to likely changes as a result of the 1976 Ammendments. Cross-sectional information of this kind has limited utility for making policy decisions about the future, except to describe a base point.

Description of a base point is particularily useful if improvements are to be sensibly incremental. In terms of implications for vocational education, the description of the base point provided by this study will perhaps have more significance as a pre-test for evaluation of vocational education programs after 1982 rather than before.

Even in describing what is, attention must be given to definition of terms, representativeness of observations, and comprehensiveness of description. A pervading concern in the study plan appears to be with securing observations which are representative and comprehensive within the limitation of resources available to conduct the study.

A fourth way for a study to have implications is for it to not merely describe but to also summarize. Summarizing calls for skills in abstracting, in recognizing the "forest as separate from the trees." This will be no small task in this study given the number of activities and sheet weight and volume of pages generated through describing. The study plan is clear in pointing out that the client for the study is the Congress, particularily those committees concerned with education. Committee members and their staff are very busy individuals as attested by Dr. Datta. Therefore, it may be reasonable to conclude that the implications of this study will not lay so much in its descriptive reports but in their summary. For, who will have time and patience to read the volumes of description.

Very little is said in the study plan about how summaries will be prepared. I suggest that this is one of several activities described later where the process of producing the report has as much potential for increasing implications as the content of the report, itself.

Summarizing is perhps the least value latent and controversial way of concluding a study. Another way for a study to provide implications is to go beyond meer summary to the point of integrating the findings of the study with other studies on the same issue, and with existing theory and practice. The study plan indicates that this will be done in at least two ways: (a) by doing reviews of literature, coordination with other on-going evaluative studies, conferences and case studies (b) by looking across the study's four components for differences and similarities in findings.

Integration of results in the planned study would have significant implications because of the large number of evaluation efforts currently going on of vocational education (e.g., mandated state and local evaluations, state and

local evaluations, state and national advisory council evaluations, development of vocational education data system (VEDS), development of state evaluation models). Integration serves the process of sorting out and organizing for communication and analysis - clearly a need by vocational educators at this time. Perhaps through proper integration, the place of the NIE study will be made explicit and, may well be the missing piece of the puzzle in putting together comprehensive and balanced national information about vocational education.

Next in line, a study could have implications by including an interpretation of its findings. Interpretation calls for answering questions about why things are as they are. Interpretations are particularily useful in increasing understanding of a phenomenon and prescribing sensible ways of improvement. Interpreting calls for knowledge of both the "trees and forest;" focus is on context, relationships, cause and effect, alternative explanations and limits to generalization. It requires the ability to "walk in the other persons shoes" (in this case, get into the classrooms, placement services, and state department long enough to be able to describe reality) and yet retain perspective. As such, doing interpretation is a very responsible task, if to be done well; however it pays off corresponding rewards in the power of its implications. A study which focuses on words such as effects, consequences, correspondence, utility, responsive, compliant, capacity, reinforcing, distinctive, needed, and quality and has substantial freedom in method and format has potential for important implications through interpretation.

The study plan seems to imply little contribution to implications by rationalizing what is found and developing theories to explain findings.

The study plan does, however, communicate that there will be some conclusions drawn and recommendations made as yet other ways in which the study can have implications. Drawing conclusions and recommendations require the added process of substantial critical judgment; not only describing what is, but what ought to be and making fair comparisons. The study appears limited in its focus on implications of this kind. However, that some conclusions will be drawn is taken from the way certain objectives are stated; they seem to imply a critical judgment will be made. For example:

> To ascertain whether the results of such assessments are used to manage or improve programs and with what results.
>
> To determine what the consequences are of specifying particular criteria in the Act.

> Discerning whether they (the various and overlapping Federal requirements of evaluation) will be complementary and reinforcing or conflicting and redundent and what their combined effects on program quality may be.
>
> With respect to consumer and homemaking education, is the system responsive in terms of who participates, what is being taught, and the innovativeness of programs and the character and need for such knowledge, skills and abilities in the future.

The areas in which conclusions are expected to be forthcoming should be especially important to vocational education. For it is in these instances that explicit judgments are made about the relative state of affairs in the phenomenon being studied.

This is even more so for areas in which recommendations are made: that is where prescriptions are made as to how to improve the state of affairs. The study plan communicates that recommendations are to be made at least in the section related to consumer and homemaking education. Specifically it states "findings---will form the basis for recommendations for improving and redirecting federally funded C & HE programs." It is important to note that there are quantum jumps in mental processing required between describing and interpreting and between interpreting and recommending.

The last way for a study to have implications is by suggesting study extensions or new research problems. None are stated in the study plan and it may be premature to expect these.

In summary, I have tried to point out the many ways in which this study could have implications for vocational education based on examining the study plan. These were through examining its potential for defining, describing, identifying issues, summarizing, interpreting, integrating, rationalizing, theorizing, concluding, recommending and suggesting extentions. In many of these ways of forming implications, the accuracy and sensibility of results will depend on the active interface between the study team, decision makers both in and out of vocational education and those doing vocational education. This interface, which I know existed in developing the plan for the study by my own participation on a technical advisory pannel, is not fully described in the plan for the full study.

I appreciated the opportunity to present my perspectives even as a replacement speaker. Although the study is still at the plan stage, this is a very appropriate time to consider implications of its results as a way to check signals and sensitize the expectations of clients (Congress and staff) as well

as those being evaluated and the staff hired to do the evaluation. If I have helped in this process, my purpose is achieved. I would like to finish with a story.

Dead or Alive

It seems, a group of young Indian braves sought to discredit their famous old medicine man by asking him a question he couldn't answer. They thought if they could cause him to make a mistake or catch him with a question he could not answer, they could replace him with a younger man. Each time, however, that they made an attempt to do this, they failed. His answers were always right and his advice always trustworthy.

One day, one of the young braves came up with a plan and told his friends. "I will catch a bird, take it to the old man, holding it in my hands so that the feathers show through my fingers. I will then say to him, 'What have I in my hands?' Seeing the feathers, he will reply, 'A bird.' Then I will say, 'That is correct. But, tell me, Wise One, is it dead or is it alive?' If he says it is dead, I will open my hands and let it fly away. If he says it is alive, I will smother it and drop it, dead, at his feet. So, you see, regardless of his answer, he will be wrong."

That evening, the young braves went to the medicine man's teepee and challenged him to come forth and be tried. The wise man came from his teepee and stood before them and the other tribes people who had gathered, "What is it, my son?" he asked.

The young man answered: It is said that you can answer all questions correctly. If this is so, Father, tell me what I have in my hands."

The old man looked and replied: "A bird, my son."

"That is correct" the young brave responded. "But tell me, Father, is it dead or is it alive?"

This was the challenge! Every Indian present held his breath, waiting for the medicine man's answer. The old man paused, then looking deep into the young man's eyes, he responded: "That, my son, depends on you."

And so you ask what are the implications of this study for vocational education?